



## The Perils of Strategic Patience with North Korea

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## The Perils of Strategic Patience with North Korea

Fatigue with the regime in Pyongyang is mounting rapidly as the lingering North Korean nuclear quagmire approaches the 25-year mark. However, the U.S. foreign policy approach is perplexing. In looking at Iran—a country that possesses not a single nuclear weapon—the United States negotiated a landmark nuclear deal in order to preclude such a possibility. Meanwhile, the Obama administration has moved action on North Korea—which already possesses nuclear weapons—to the back burner.

North Korea poses a more serious problem than Iran, one that requires much more nuanced diplomatic approaches. To date, it has conducted three nuclear tests, and occasionally threatens to do more, all the while blackmailing South Korea, Japan, and the United States with its nuclear and missile capabilities. Beyond a policy of “strategic patience,” or maintaining the current sanctions regime and waiting for North Korea to change, the Obama administration has no strategies in the works to resolve the nuclear proliferation threat. So far, this policy stance has resulted in nothing but watching, waiting, and anticipating a collapse of North Korea.

In the face of North Korea’s continuing pursuit of its nuclear programs, strategic patience is counterintuitive. Given that these threats are said to originate from an unpredictable, irrational, and repressive regime, this pursuit is worrisome and

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**Washington  
knows far less about  
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hence demands greater attention from U.S. foreign policymakers. Yet, the Obama administration's lack of attention or, as one expert described it, "take it or leave it"<sup>1</sup> diplomacy to North Korea persists, with no clear roadmap to denuclearization.

While awaiting North Korea's concession, two deleterious things have occurred. First, Washington's insights into the regime in Pyongyang and its third-generation leader, Kim Jong-un, are superficial because the Obama administration no longer tries hard to penetrate into the strategic mindset of the North. Washington accuses Pyongyang of unleashing a politics of terror leading to dire human rights violations, but knows far less about its internal political mechanisms, intents and motives, military capabilities, and economic conditions than when it used to engage North Korea during the Clinton administration.

Second, this diminished understanding of North Korea has led to a relentless tide of hasty predictions. For instance, Jamie Metz, Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council, claimed that "today, the North Korean madness may well be nearing its endgame,"<sup>2</sup> and Wendy R. Sherman, former Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, remarked that "the sustainable answer to denuclearization is the unification of the Koreas."<sup>3</sup> Although North Korea is still standing and developing its nuclear program in spite of two leadership successions, a devastating famine, and continuous sanctions, many pundits and experts increasingly focus on North Korea's imminent collapse as the ultimate solution—a mantra whose time has never come.

This article outlines the problems of relying on the idea of North Korean "collapsism"—the predictive discourse confidently weighted toward North Korea's demise, and policies of non-engagement seeking to hasten its collapse. I argue that North Korean collapsism has adversely affected the diplomatic and strategic calculations of the United States, which opposes negotiating with North Korea. Contrary to conventional wisdom, by now we should recognize that North Korea has continued successfully, despite repeated claims of imminent collapse. Even if the current leadership in Pyongyang disappears, why should we expect a new leadership to give up the nuclear weapon programs? Basing policy on such a fantastic hope is foolish.

If we agree that the United States and its allies are more rational, strategic, and civilized than North Korea, then re-initiating the peaceful denuclearization process has to come from our side. If we further agree that the likelihood of North Korea's imminent collapse is low while North Korea's nuclear capabilities are increasing, can we continue to say that time is on our side?

Whoever sits in the Oval Office has to deal with the conundrum of the North Korean nuclear venture sooner or later. The North Korean quagmire will endure whether we imagine its collapse or not, so waiting and preparing for North Korea's collapse is a terrible idea. The United States and South Korea should create diplomatic opportunities to deal with North Korea on the more likely basis that the regime may well be here to stay and will further expand its nuclear weapons program.

**Waiting and preparing for North Korea's collapse is a terrible idea.**

Against this backdrop, this article will review the underlying logic behind North Korean collapsism, and argue how and why such an assessment is inimical to achieving the denuclearization of Pyongyang. I will then argue why the policy of strategic patience, namely waiting and preparing for North Korea's collapse, is a terrible idea for the denuclearization of North Korea, and why engaging North Korea through negotiation sooner rather than later is a rational policy for the U.S. administration to pursue. I will propose a roadmap to induce the North back to the negotiating table, and discuss how the United States and other members of the Six-Party Talks can create the conditions necessary to resume the denuclearization process.

### **Wish Upon a Falling Kim**

The 2010 Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia brought about a series of dictatorial regime collapses that spread to Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. Following on the heels of this Arab Spring, many experts started to predict that the next regime to topple would be North Korea.<sup>4</sup> The enthusiastic tones of North Korean watchers in the West echoed one another as they heralded the country's impending collapse due to its intractable economy, the inflow of information into the North, the breakdown of its social monitoring system, and an unsettled succession transition.

Interestingly, this tone of collapse is reminiscent of the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> The collapsists of that decade used to list a set of identical indicators such as the unstable political leadership in Pyongyang after the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994, the North's unsalvageable economy, increasing social disobedience, and the inflexibility of the regime in the face of a rapidly unfolding political situation.<sup>6</sup> In late 1997, for example, the Central Intelligence Agency gathered a panel of U.S. security experts for a series of discussions on North Korea's future. The panel predicted North Korea's collapse within five years, postulating that "the prospect seems strong that the Kim regime's refusal to reverse course in favor of major reform could generate some catalyst that will lead to its collapse."<sup>7</sup> Apparently even today, some of the panel members continue to believe in North Korea's collapse.

Once again in the 21st century, after the death of Kim Jong-il in December 2011, we saw the same logic applied to predictions of North Korea's collapse.<sup>8</sup> It usually involved reference to Kim Jong-un's lack of experience and/or the chronically unreformable economy.<sup>9</sup> Immediately after Kim Jong-il's death, for instance, Victor Cha confidently asserted, "North Korea as we know it is over ... the regime will not hold together in the next few weeks or over several months."<sup>10</sup> Since "the process of opening up will undeniably lead to the end of his political control," anything that young Kim attempted in order to rescue the economy would be declared "a mission impossible." Hence, Cha claims, "the forty-fifth president of the United States will contend with a major crisis of governance in North Korea before he or she leaves office."<sup>11</sup> Likewise, analyst Bruce Bennett in 2014 envisioned "a reasonable probability" of collapse in North Korea in the "foreseeable future," and further argued that North Korea's end "will be accompanied by considerable violence and upheaval."<sup>12</sup>

The perceived fragility of succession politics in North Korea—a popular predictor in 1994—once again became a central argument supporting the perspective of North Korean collapsism.<sup>13</sup> Minxin Pei, professor at Claremont McKenna College, wrote in 2010 that "the chances of a successful succession from the first generation dictator to his son are roughly one in four, and no grandson of a first generation dictator has ever succeeded in taking over a regime and consolidating power."<sup>14</sup>

Anything that the young, novice leader does has also been interpreted as a sign of regime instability. Analysis of Kim Jong-un's execution of his uncle, Jang Song-taek, in 2013 is a case in point. Sue Mi Terry, Senior Research Scholar at the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, argues that, "although Jang's removal may help strengthen Kim's rule in the short run, it could have the opposite effect in the long run, convincing North Korean elites that the 31-year-old heir to the throne is too hotheaded to be trusted."<sup>15</sup> In the same vein, Doug Bandow, Senior Fellow at the Cato institute, confidently asserts, "Kim Jong-un celebrated Jang's execution as demonstrating national unity. More likely, however, the regime's foundation is cracking."<sup>16</sup>

The problem with these claims is that collapsists are overconfident in their evaluations of a leadership structure that we know considerably less about now than in years past. It could just as easily be said that purging the second-most-powerful man in the inner circle by a newly emerged young leader was an indicator that his grip on power was stronger than expected.

The key decision makers responsible for U.S. security policy persist in their belief of North Korea's eventual collapse. Jeffrey Bader, former senior director for Asian Affairs at the National Security Council, revealed the pervasiveness of collapsist thinking within the Obama administration when he stated in 2011 that "many of us believed that the most likely long-term solution to the North's

nuclear pursuit lay in the North's collapse and absorption into a South-led reunified Korea."<sup>17</sup> In 2014, Walter Sharp, the Commander of the U.S. Forces in Korea, testified to Congress that "combined with the country's disastrous centralized economy, dilapidated industrial sector, insufficient agricultural base, malnourished military and populace, and developing nuclear programs, the possibility of a sudden change in the North could be destabilizing and unpredictable."<sup>18</sup> Then in January 2015, President Obama, in an interview live-streamed on YouTube, joined the collapsist camp by characterizing North Korea as "the most isolated, the most sanctioned, the most cut-off nation" in the world and predicted that "over time [we] will see a regime like this collapse."<sup>19</sup>

The belief in North Korea's inevitable collapse is transmitted as a set of hardline policy scripts. Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, believes that North Korea has not shown any signs of change and advocates that "only one approach is commensurate with the challenge: ending North Korea's existence as an independent entity and reunifying the Korean Peninsula." To "undermine North Korea within," he promotes a set of policies "extending support to NGOs trying to get information to people inside this closed but not impermeable country."<sup>20</sup> Mark Fitzpatrick, Director of the Nonproliferation and Disarmament Program at the Institute for International Strategic Studies, echoed this view when he claimed, "the regime cannot control the flow of information." In answer to the North Korean problem, he promotes the use of sanctions as a measure that will "hasten the day when the world will no longer have to worry about North Korea because there will no longer be a DPRK, but rather, one unified Korea."<sup>21</sup>

Both of these men believe that sending information directly to average North Koreans in leaflets, DVDs, and USB drives can sabotage regime viability in Pyongyang. These collapsists argue that South Korea and the United States should stop "propping up the Kim Dynasty in return for fleeting assurances of better behavior."<sup>22</sup> That is, if we are to seal Kim Jong-un's fate, no more aid should be given to the North. In this vein, collapsists argue that the West should not hesitate to impose tight sanctions for "fear of destabilizing the country" in order to "retaliate proportionately in response to North Korea's provocations."<sup>23</sup>

Reflecting the collapsist view, President Obama argues that "we will keep on ratcheting the pressure ... And it is hard to sustain that kind of regime in this modern world. Information ends up seeping in overtime and bringing about change, and that's something that we are constantly looking for ways to accelerate."<sup>24</sup> Apparently, belief in North Korean collapsism explains why policy in Washington toward North Korea has become static and less responsive to the North Korean nuclear problem. Through collapsism, these wishful thinkers have clearly constructed a very fragile North Korea that, with any luck—to

their minds—we can propel to its end through a combination of strategic patience and more consistent sanctioning.

**The regime in Pyongyang has managed not one, but two leadership successions.**

### **North Korea Continues**

Nonetheless, North Korea endures.<sup>25</sup> The regime in Pyongyang has managed not one, but two leadership successions; first from Kim Il-sung to his son, Jong-il,<sup>26</sup> and now to his grandson, Jong-un. Smart sanctions, financial sanctions, and proliferation interdiction have failed to curtail North Korea's delinquent behavior. Pyongyang now has nuclear capabilities

and has placed a satellite in orbit using its own missile technology. North Korea has muddled though the heavy sanctions and deepening isolations, and claimed its commitment to the *Byeongjin* doctrine (simultaneous development of nuclear weapons and the economy).

Albeit premature and yet to be verified, recent reports from fieldwork and data from South Korea surprisingly reveal that North Korea's economy is, in fact, *growing* due to recent limited economic and agricultural reforms.<sup>27</sup> For a reclusive communist state led by a young novice leader operating under heavy sanctions, North Korea's economy isn't doing that badly. According to the Bank of Korea,<sup>28</sup> following five consecutive years of negative growth, North Korea recorded a jump in GDP of 1.3 percent in 2012, 1.1 percent in 2013, and 1.0 percent in 2014. When combined, the sectors of fisheries and farming grew at a rate of 3.9 percent in 2012, while industrial output and manufacturing were both up by 1.6 percent over the same period in 2013. In 2014, North Korea's imports and exports stood at \$7.61 billion, up \$0.27 billion from 2013—the highest level since the Bank of Korea (in Seoul) first began monitoring North Korea's economy.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the hardest time for North Koreans has passed, thanks to an increase in agricultural production.<sup>30</sup>

Economic aid from, and trade with, China is obviously helping the North sustain its economy despite widespread speculation that China may abandon it.<sup>31</sup> Sino–North Korean trade reached a record high of \$6.85 billion in 2014, which accounts for 90.1 percent of North Korea's total trade.<sup>32</sup> China is not likely to abandon the North, regardless of how dissatisfied it grows with Pyongyang. For China, the geopolitical value of North Korea has remained the same—or may have even increased—at a time when the United States is shoring up its alliances with Japan and South Korea. Beijing needs a stable and predictable regime in Pyongyang to sustain its economic development in Manchuria, where

North Korea provides natural resources such as coal and iron ore. Hence, any political crisis in the periphery of China complicates Beijing's developmental strategies. The last things that China wants to see are a massive influx of refugees from North Korea and diplomatic complications associated with North Korea's collapse. In this vein, North Korea is also a geo-economic asset to help sustain stable economic development in northern China.<sup>33</sup>

All of this has happened at a time when South Korea and the United States have rallied international support for sanctions on North Korea. These reports and data serve as a reminder that collapse is not the sole path possible for North Korea;<sup>34</sup> a more plausible reality may see North Korea's endurance for many years to come. For the past 25 years, collapsists have self-assuredly pointed to the same variables in making their prediction. The failure of this prediction to materialize should caution us against substituting wishful thinking for more probable developments.<sup>35</sup> The fact that North Korea still exists and has succeeded in developing nuclear weapons speaks to both North Korea's uniqueness<sup>36</sup> and unknowability.

All this should add to the realization that it is time to reformulate our approach to North Korea. We need a response based not on wishful thinking, but upon the more plausible outcome that North Korea will continue to persevere. We should pay greater attention to how we can achieve denuclearization of the North and bring about a more constructive outcome on the Korean Peninsula, rather than waiting for the North to change or even disappear.

### The Limits of Strategic Patience

Advocates of the current approach argue that the United States should wait patiently for North Korea to change its strategic calculus and threat perception to our liking while continuing with sanctions and preparing for North Korea's collapse. Simply put, in this view, the best policy option is "wait and see." However, we need to realize that collapsism diverts policy attention away from achieving a peaceful resolution of the current nuclear stalemate. Predictions of North Korea's imminent collapse tend to create an image of a very fragile North Korea, which in turn creates a policy environment supporting hardline sanctioning mechanisms under the misguided belief that these measures will hasten and induce collapse.

For the last seven years, we have enforced sanctions on Pyongyang as punishment for its defective behavior. A barrage of sanctions following instances of provocative behavior have been imposed on Pyongyang through UN Security

**C**ollapsism diverts policy attention away from a peaceful resolution of the nuclear stalemate.

Council Resolution 1718 in 2006, 1874 in 2009, and 2087 in 2013, in addition to the unilateral sanctions imposed by the United States after the SONY hacking in 2014. These sanctions are designed to tighten North Korea's access to critical technologies and financial resources in order to induce a significant change in behavior. However, they have done little to alter North Korea's behavior or prevent nuclear development.

Strategic patience has deteriorated the quality of information on North Korea's nuclear program and Pyongyang's intention on the nuclear endgame. Strategic patience does not permit any meaningful engagements with North Korea either to ensure that Pyongyang is aware of the United States' and its allies' commitment to peaceful denuclearization, or to verify what kinds of endgame Pyongyang really envisions with its nuclear program. Apart from imposing sanctions on Pyongyang, the United States has not been able to formulate ways to bring the IAEA inspectors back to North Korea's nuclear site to monitor its nuclear activities.

The absence of dialogues with the leadership in Pyongyang does not provide Washington any window into the strategic mindset of Kim Jong-un and his leadership circle. Instead, beliefs in North Korea's collapse have flourished and blinded the strategic calculus of the United States. As a result, the U.S. understanding of North Korea's leadership and WMD programs has gotten worse, to the point where Iran and Syria look more like an open game. This is not simply an intelligence failure but a policy failure. Intelligence should serve policy. It does not matter much even if we have satellite images and chemical signatures on North Korea's nuclear activities. What we need now is a more innovative approach to North Korea to help us gain quality information about North Korea's intended roadmap to resolve the current stalemate with Pyongyang.

Waiting for the North to change has caused the situation to deteriorate further. The North Korean nuclear threat is "no longer hypothetical but real and present."<sup>37</sup> Pyongyang has conducted nuclear tests, possesses nuclear warheads and medium-range missiles, launched a satellite with an ICBM, and may soon miniaturize warheads.<sup>38</sup> According to an analysis by Joel Wit, Visiting Scholar at the U.S.–Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, North Korean nuclear capability is poised to grow at an alarming rate.<sup>39</sup> Pyongyang may possess twenty nuclear weapons at minimum, or it could have "a stockpile numbering one hundred nuclear weapons" in the worst-case scenario. Most likely, the North could produce up to 50 nuclear weapons with "significant progress in miniaturizing warheads to place on missiles and increasing the explosive yields of those weapons."<sup>40</sup> All in all, the quagmire is amazingly simple: the longer North Korea's nuclear problem remains unsolved, the more likely we are to become inured to a nuclear North Korea and therefore pass over a viable option to denuclearize the country.<sup>41</sup> Waiting for North Korea's collapse does nothing to enhance the security of the United States and its allies.

Strategic patience has also helped Pyongyang justify its threat perception and use it against Washington. The regime in Pyongyang will be better able to use North Korean collapsism as a logical platform to further legitimize its so-called nuclear survival strategy—so long as the outside world wishes openly for its collapse, it is not likely to give up its nuclear program. This means that North Korea will remain an unbearably difficult game to play for the next president of the United States.

Beyond making North Korea cling more tightly to its nukes, strategic patience has also created “an exasperatingly difficult culture”<sup>42</sup> within Washington for a rational analysis of North Korea’s strategic calculus because North Korea was widely perceived to be evil, fragile, unpredictable, and deceiving no matter what. This culture makes it difficult to imagine what Pyongyang is likely to do in response to the Obama administration’s demands for denuclearization or to even brainstorm what kinds of steps we can make to resolve this lingering problem.

Furthermore, waiting for Pyongyang to change jeopardizes U.S. geostrategic interests in Northeast Asia—a region where long-term U.S. national interests are complicated by a rising China and a nuclear North Korea. Strategic patience sounds like an admission by the Obama administration that it has no viable approach to North Korea and is stepping back from the region’s most profound problem, while passing the buck to Beijing on an issue that is vital to U.S. interests. Moreover, an operationally nuclear North Korea will result in heavier alliance burdens for South Korea and Japan, which in turn are likely to generate balancing behaviors such as a stronger Sino–Russian coalition.<sup>43</sup> Even nowadays, China has strengthened its relationship with Russia as the United States is beefing up its alliance with Japan and South Korea. A multi-billion dollar gas delivery contract, big budget arms deals, a series of financial deals including Russia’s active support to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and most notably military cooperation through increased joint naval exercises in the East China Sea are just a few examples that indicate stronger Sino–Russian collaboration.

The United States can no longer afford to wait for North Korea to change its calculus—waiting will only produce a more rigid nuclear North Korea. Sanctions are ineffective, and the United States does not have an acceptable military option. Given the risk that a U.S. military attack on the North would incur for South Korea, such an option should be considered an immoral act of the highest order. Unless the United States and South Korea are prepared to either invade North Korea, accept North Korea as a nuclear state, or endure at least another twenty years of Pyongyang’s nuclear adventures, the United States is left with only one option: engaging the North.

**Strategic patience sounds like passing the buck to Beijing.**

## The Roadmap to Re-engagement

Engagement is “the method to seek progress.”<sup>44</sup> Erecting a wall of silence in the name of strategic patience will only exacerbate the present danger and render it uncontrollable. The mentality underlying strategic patience only hopes to gain North Korea’s surrender, something that is clearly not going to happen. Thus, we need to get back to the original puzzle: how do you disarm a North Korea that believes nuclear development is its only security deterrent in the face of the U.S. threat, and whose nuclear arsenal is a symbol of national identity?

The principal obstacle to resolving the North Korean nuclear problem may be the lack of meaningful steps by Pyongyang to showcase its sincere commitment to denuclearization. In short, it simply doesn’t wish to give up its nukes. Because of this, the problem becomes one focused less on North Korean sincerity and more on how to pave a smoother way for Pyongyang to come to the negotiating table. Can the outside world create an opportunity to construct conditions under which the engine of the denuclearization process can restart?

One option may essentially be to test if North Korea is willing to receive U.S. security assurances in exchange for denuclearization. A principal risk is that North Korea might cheat and want or try to become a nuclear power anyway. Thus, the most urgent action item for the Obama administration is to find out if North Korea is open to reasonable offers for denuclearization in a verifiable and non-reversible way. The Obama administration needs to specify what steps North Korea should take, how the United States and the members of the Six-Party Talks (6PT) will reciprocate if North Korea cooperates, and what kind of endgame the United States and its allies envision for the future of North Korea.

To be clear, inducing the North to abandon its nuclear weapons program should remain the final goal. But it cannot serve as the primary goal for now. For the moment, the primary goal is to make the North realize that negotiation is the only way out of its isolation. Thus, the key element of the general policy toward Pyongyang should be to stop threatening the North with collapsist rhetoric and instead lay out a denuclearization roadmap.

**The key element is to stop threatening the North with collapsist rhetoric.**

The U.S. venture in North Korean denuclearization must start with identifying how serious Pyongyang is in coming back to the 6PT. Diplomacy is a valid approach because it can help us identify if North Korean public statements about the 6PT, which often called for resumption of the multilateral negotiation process, reflect their will to return to the negotiating table.

The Obama administration should first propose a low-level meeting to North Korea in order to ascertain this will. As a precondition for a high-level

meeting, it can reinforce the February 2012 deal wherein North Korea agreed to suspend nuclear and long-range missile tests and allow inspectors to monitor its nuclear sites in exchange for food aid.<sup>45</sup> By resurrecting this deal, the United States can secure a platform to make practical progress in denuclearizing the North while opening the door for further negotiation.

Such a series of preparatory meetings between the United States and North Korea can let us determine if Pyongyang's requirements for security assurance from the United States is nothing more than habitual rhetoric. If and when North Korea confirms its commitment to the denuclearization process by declaring a moratorium on all of its nuclear activities and missile tests, the Obama administration could declare that it is not only ready to negotiate the denuclearization process at the 6PT but also willing to discuss diplomatic normalization with the North to further test Pyongyang's sincere commitment to peaceful denuclearization.

To be clear, the United States should propose initiating diplomatic normalization talks with Pyongyang only if the North initiates the complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement (CVID) of North Korea's nuclear programs. To secure CVID, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) should be permitted to enact its nuclear disablement process at the fuel fabrication plant in Yongbyon. This would prevent North Korea from reloading its reactor to generate more plutonium-laden spent fuel. By the time the CVID process has finished, diplomatic normalization between the two states could be complete with a non-aggression pact and peace treaty for the Korean Peninsula.

The United States should of course make sure that, should there be any defection or cheating by the North, the whole negotiation process for diplomatic normalization could be reversed. The endgame of the Six-Party Talks should be to secure a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula and to conclude a peace treaty between China, the United States, and the two Koreas.

The more serious problem is that the Obama administration is running out of time. It lacks the domestic political capital to jumpstart nuclear diplomacy on the North Korean issue. President Obama faces domestic political backlash from a Republican-controlled Congress opposed to the détente with Cuba and the nuclear deal with Iran. More generally, fatigue with the North Korean issue is very strong. Skeptics may argue that the jury is already out—the Obama administration is likely to set aside the issue of North Korea until the end of its term.

However, President Obama must realize that his foreign policy has been transformational, seen in his commitment to restore multilateral cooperation in world politics, bold risk-taking in normalizing relations with Cuba, diplomatic flexibility in reaching out to Myanmar, and persistent engagement in achieving a breakthrough with Iran. Hence, the Obama administration should take one more step and make a bold move in reviving, in his campaign words, “sustained,

direct and aggressive diplomacy”<sup>46</sup> toward North Korea for the sake of U.S. interests. Otherwise, the next president will certainly continue to face an operationally nuclear North Korea.

All in all, before its term expires, the Obama administration should create structures that will constrain Pyongyang’s nuclear program by offering incentives for verifiable and irreversible denuclearization. Engaging North Korea through negotiation is how the United States can prevent the worst-case scenario at the lowest-possible price. Critics may call this extortion or rewarding North Korea’s bad behavior, but in the language of diplomacy, we call this a trade-off. For any trade-off to be sustainable, the United States should not trust North Korea but create verifiable mechanisms that the IAEA can monitor during the dismantling of North Korea’s nuclear programs. Refusing to talk to North Korea because it is a rogue regime is not a policy; it is a stubborn attitude.

### **Stop Waiting for Godot**

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The world might be better off without North Korea. Such wishful thinking, however, has done little to deter Pyongyang from attempting to become operationally nuclear, while the passage of time has shown the regime to be more resilient than anticipated. This means that policy toward North Korea should consider outcomes other than collapse. North Korea is a complex problem, and North Korean collapsism contributes little to the search for a viable solution to the current stalemate. Rather than softening North Korea’s feisty defiance, strategic patience helps justify the regime’s so-called struggle against a new form of “U.S. imperialism.” After 25 years of consuming the myth of North Korea’s imminent collapse, it would be unbearably painful to face a future where North Korea emerges as an operationally nuclear state. If such a scenario were to materialize, we would have only ourselves to blame.

If we agree that the peaceful resolution of North Korea’s nuclear issue is a must for constructing peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, then first we need to realize that North Korea as a state will not disappear any time soon. In this vein, the Obama administration should give one more push for engagement before its term expires—a position that Beijing and Russia will definitely support. Only a bilateral dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang can bring about a fundamental breakthrough in the current stalemate. This requires a cognitive reorientation about the actual viability of North Korean collapsism.

The Obama administration needs to reexamine the strategic utility of negotiating with Pyongyang. North Korea’s nuclear weapons program may be exchangeable in return for U.S. security assurances, a situation which can lead to gradual change in North Korea’s state identity from a rogue nation to a reformable

state. We all need to realize that North Korea's failure to collapse may be the result of "the regime's very different history, the pragmatic shrewdness of its post-Soviet foreign policy, [and] the desperate survival strategies it is willing to undertake,"<sup>47</sup> as Bruce Cumings, a professor at the University of Chicago, wrote in 2013.

Given that we are dealing with a state that has a track record of deception and provocation, negotiation is not about rewarding North Korea for its behavior, it is simply about choosing the right path toward a nuclear-free Korean peninsula. Waiting and hoping for North Korea's collapse may be therapeutically comforting, but will not provide actual remedies for this lingering problem. Time is not on our side.

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